

Chapter 27

Envoi

Şan‘ā’ As It Was

This volume concludes, as it began, with verses on Şan‘ā’. These are composed by the contemporary poet of the colloquial, Muḥammad al-Dhahbānī, a Şan‘ānī humorous versifier of the Banī Ḥushaysh—though unlike that tribe which supported the Ḥamīd al-Dīn, he opposed the Imamic régime. He is a pleasant-spoken rather quiet man of, now, 60, hailing from Dhahbān village, 15 kilometres from Şan‘ā’. As a boy he attended elementary schools in the capital. Before the 1962 coup he composed lyric poetry (*ghazal* and *wasf*), but after this he started writing political verse in support of the Republic. During the short-lived Government drive against *qāt* in 1972 he followed the official line with a diatribe against ‘*Shajarat al-qāt*’.¹ His partisanship for his ‘Ḥimyarī’ ancestors probably implies a corresponding antagonism to the descendants of ‘Adnān, i.e., the Sayyids!

Most of al-Dhahbānī’s verses in *ḥumaynī* have been delivered over the radio for they have a swinging quality to them coupled with rich colloquial diction and expression that cannot but appeal to the Şan‘ānī, but they sometimes also appear in the newspapers. Al-Dhahbānī nevertheless has not always a proper understanding of language, sometimes using words in totally incorrect senses. Now and then a line of verse can be quite lame, perhaps because, being an extempore poet, his muse fails him, but it is alleged that he is a *mutaḥashshish* which it is suggested may be the cause. In some quarters one hears regrets expressed that he should have turned his talents to propaganda, but this is a field where poets are rarely discriminating!

The verses that follow are taken from a poem, *Old and new*,² composed on ‘Īd al-Naḥr, the Feast of the Sacrifices, on Mount Nuqum.

- 1 Lord of the Living and of the Dead,
Thou Sustainer of all created beings,
Forgive my trespass, erase what is past,
Make my end good and virtuous acts rewarded.
- 2 My head has turned grey, but I’m a failed pupil,
Sitting among humble folk, loaded with chains,
My pen and my tongue are a-fighting
Those wearing crowns and those of [social] ills.
- 3 My mind is distraught—what shall I do?
Shall I look at Şan‘ā’, rub the salt in my wounds,
[To see] how it was in former time?
It was blind, in ruins and ugly!
- 4 We used to chat of an evening by the light of lamps
Irrigating them with paraffin from dusk—

The poor man’s lamp with a cotton wick.
By oil-(light) he would pass all his evening times.

- 5 Şan‘ā’ too was kept in the dark, unjustly treated,
With diseases it was enfevered,
With streets of dust, deep in dust,
Streets dark and full of insects.
- 6 The shops of the Market folk were (mere) holes.
You’d see a shop like a fodder store [for beasts].
Even the merchant was a boorish ignorant fellow,
Importing black cotton or striped (*Shāmi*) cloth.
- 7 The labourer, a poor fellow, to be pitied,
At times he’d work, at times rest idle,
Many the workman there was, depriving his family of food.
Whatever came his way the Qāt Market would take.
- 8 The barber—his shop was a hovel.
Anyone coming for a shave would give him a *buqshah*
Pity on him—what sort of life was that?
Should he rest to take breath, he’d perish, alas the pity of it.
- 9 The blacksmith sticking by his bellows,
With his own hands cuts and welds.
‘His soup is his sweat’, charcoal hard (to get).
The clamour he makes shakes everyone in the Quarters.
- 10 A fellow (working) in the Carpentry Market
Was in suffering night and day.
He turned grey-haired from hard work with the awl.
If he rose to saw giddiness overcame him or death.
- 11 With his water-skin the water-carrier passes by
From sparrow-fart till after dusk,
His breakfast (but) a bap stuck in his neck-opening,
Wearing a (sleeveless) jacket made from cow-hide.
- 12 The butcher calls/invites any one who comes to him.
If he sells his meat [on credit] his business declines.
He used go around like the *dallāls*.
The list of the debts (owed him) comes to four columns.
- 13 The cook cooks in a *birmah*-pot,
Half of the fenugreek (*ḥilbah*) is on his fleece-lined coat.
At the baker’s door there are seventy cats.
He hates if the bakeresses come [and outsell him].
- 14 Woman—folks, how did she stand?
How she laboured! How she was despised!

1 *Al-Thawrah*, Şan‘ā’, 4.iv.72.

2 *Al-Anghām al-sha‘biyyah*, n.d. (1971 ?), 23.

- They used to stop her, should she say
She would like to read the very Qur'ān itself.
- 15 In her worldly affairs she was frustrated, wearied,
Bound up with the *'uṣbah*-headband,
Dumb she was, become stupid.
The Imām left them in ignorance.
- 16 Woman—she was kept in purdah,
In the [living] world she was (already) in the grave.
If she could read/recite they said it's a shame—to be
kept hid.
Only chantresses recite.
- 17 In the house she'd unravel the woof then re-ply it,
Or in the *dihliz* make millet-stalks and lucerne into
fodder twists [for the animals],
Putting on her (good) clothes when she'd finished milking.
Women in days gone-by were merry.
- 18 Verses 18 to 22 describe the traditional costume of
Şan'ānī women and have been quoted in cap. p. 537a-b.
- * * *
- 23 As for the housework and cooking,
The husband too had the time of his life.
A room would be all arranged like a flower,
You'd want to sit in it—this would be your utmost desire.
- 24 She'd rise early to grind, from midnight,
Early in the morning she'd go off to the *ghayl*,
Swishing into the kitchen like a flash-flood.
In the evening she'd milk a couple of cows.
- 25 She'd sit drinking (*qishr*)-coffee and sorting through corn,
Get up to draw water, but the water was brackish.
If she had kneaded she'd start to cry,
(At) wet firewood and dung-cake fuel still damp.
- 26 She'd lunch, then go to women's gatherings a-visiting.
This verse and the four following verses deal mainly
with her costume (see p. 537b).
- * * *
- 31 Who left us ill-favoured and dishevelled?
Who made us live a life like cows?
(None other but) Mām Yaḥyā—he could hardly die—
He died only through four revolts!
- 32 Men in olden time would fight together,
They'd stab (each-other) with their daggers.
With oil of *tartar* (mustard) they would rub
Their hands and feet against cold weather.
- 33 Ignorance struck at them with its whips.
They were occupied only with daily needs and buying
grain.
Mām Yaḥyā spread out his (prayer) carpet,
Made them mindless and filled them with prayers.
- 34 He let them sing of his name,
Say—how fortunate his star is.
The man of honour would come running to present his
gift,
So that he would pray blessings on him.
- 35 Ignorant folk he misled into error. Made a tail [to
his turban].
Any stupid man would kiss his knee.

3 Ibid, 17.

4 Firewood being sold there.

5 At one time the tanneries were mainly in Ḥārat al-Ṭawāshī.

The 'Liberals' he dubbed hostile to the 'Alawīs,
And in prison murdered them by hundreds.

- 36 Sitting resplendent in his carriage,
Dressed in a cloak shining with silver broideries,
A turban green, couleur de rose,
And striped shawl tricked out with holy verses.
- 37 His dagger belt (reached up) to his chest,
Inscribed with gold, red-glowing like a coal,
Twenty rosettes set round the dagger,
Of pur *lāz*-silver, finely inscribed.
- 38 His (led) horse behind (the carriage) a-jingling
With bells and silver balls—sweet basil,
And the black slave with sword drawn—
Any who'd attack the Mām—he'd chop him into little
pieces!
- 39 Beside him we (looked like) flies,
With a couple of caps and only two long shirts.
Black as crows we were then—
We didn't dare wear silken cloth.
- 40 He was, they say, of the Ahl al-Khaṭwah,
Knowing beforehand what we shall be doing tomorrow
While we were still bemused with sleep.
How could we know how to revolt?
- 41 We used to recite in the Qur'ān-school,
The pupils would be exhausted by the over-crowding,
The stink of microbes would rise to a man's height,
Filth and disease—long lines of lice.
- 42 We'd read the A.B.C. on (our) boards.
If the stink spread around we'd flee to the (play)ground.
We used to drink from the dirt on the bottom of the jar—
In the water were numbers of insects.
- 43 We used to recite *Bism al-Bāsimī*,
And 'Alif has nothing', in darkness,
With a dominie (*faqīh*) dry as a bone,
Who hung up above him a couple of bastinados.
- 44 Ugly (indeed) was the state of Şan'ā',
The Imām let it become mortified for very shame.
The Saba' Bath he called a soak-pit,
And the hero of Ghaymān, he said, had (his) defects.

The remainder of the poem extols the Russian arms acquired,
the employment and training of Yemeni women in the Şan'ā'
textile factory, but seems to know no other than these dubious
benefits to the country. Since it attacks King Faisal it would be
composed during the Nasserite intervention. Another poem,³
composed in September 1964 tells us,

Bāb al-Sabaḥ was a dump for firewood,⁴
And the *ghayl* (ran) beside the ablution-places.
If rain came the road was stopped up with mud—
Everyone walking past would hold his nose [because of
the evil smell].
Bāb al-Yaman—how was it, the Grape Market
And the Samsarah of Dār al-Ṭawāshī?⁵
It was impossible to walk without boots,⁶
Because of the profusion of garbage.

Sayyid Aḥmad al-Shāmī remarked that in his days the streets of
Şan'ā' were clean (as indeed the photographs taken by Dr Hugh
Scott in 1937 clearly show), and if one did see a piece of paper in
the street, one was told to collect it and put it somewhere more

6 Turkish *qanfurah/qunṭarah* = *kundur, jazmah*. It seems that many people did
not wear footwear in Şan'ā' in those days.

fitting since it might have the name of God upon it. You were not even allowed to blow the mucus (*mukhāf*) from your nose onto the street. During the floods of August 1975 the writers found the state of Ṣan'ā' streets was perhaps much worse than formerly as garbage now includes a mass of plastics, tins, cardboard etc. However al-Dhahbānī tells us, no doubt with poetic licence,

But today—Ṣan'ā' has become like Aleppo,
Adorned like a carpet.
The shops are clothed in gold,
And its streets are clean.

Commentary

Verse 1

This is a conventional religious opening of a type common to all verse in southern Arabia, perhaps Arabia in general.

Verse 2

Rāsib, a failed pupil, *awḍā'*, pl. of *waḍī'* humble, *ḥānib* = *mushakkal*, fettered.
By 'crowns' he means the Imāms.

Verse 3

Mā bayn af'al, *bayn* said to mean *dhā*, but probably similar to Ḥaḍramī *bā* used with the imperfect to indicate the future. *Tafalfal*, explained as *yijlis qaliq*, *ithaymaj*, *itfahfah*, to be pained as if one had chillies (*bisbās*) in a wound.

Verse 4

Uṭbah, lit. a piece of cotton, wick.

Verse 5

Ad = *ād*, *mazlūmah* is translated in its double senses, *ghabrā* fem. of *aghbar*, meaning covered with *ghubār*, *ḡulmī* = *ḡalam*.

Verse 6

Khizqān, sing., *khuzq*, hole, *tibsir* = *tubšir*, *mitbān*, place for fodder, *dushmān* Turco-Persian, *al-mughaffil alladhī mā ya'rīf shay*, *ghayr muta'allim*, *al-qabīlī 'aduww al-madānī*. The last explanation is interesting—the tribesman foe of the townsman. He is illiterate, not a *qārī*. *Dukmah* is women's cotton used for *al-tarjūlah haqq al-libās*, the lower part of the trousers below the knee. Incidentally the commentator in mentioning this latter used the respectful phrase '*Azzak Allāh*, God honour you (see p. 423a). *Başmah*, pl. *başamat*, is a sort of striped (*mukhaṭṭat*) cloth, not plain (*sādah*) with marks on it like finger prints (*başmah*, pl., *abšūm*).

Verse 7

Yinsum = *yistariḥ*, *zārat*, many, *miḥrim*, depriving. The workman would spend all his money on *qāt*. This is a common complaint not only in Ṣan'ā' but in Aden.

Verse 8

Ishshah, often a brushwood hut, *yā ghabnī*, alas, *lā yihlak* = *la-yihlak*, *ḥasarat* = *nadamāt*, sighs. *Wā ḥasratāh* means 'What a pity' and *Ghabnī 'alay-k*, 'How much you have suffered'.

Verse 9

Lāsī, sticking to, *yilāsī*, to weld, lit., stick together, *sawd*, charcoal, *qāsī* = *ṣulb*. Line 3 is a proverb, '*Araq-ah maraq-ah*'.

Verse 10

Minjārah, carpentry, *mikhḍarah*, awl, cf. *khadar*, *yakhḍir al-bāb*, make a hole in the door, *sayyakh*, *uṣība bi-dawkhah*.

Verse 11

Yilwī = *yimurr*, *fadhḍah*, see p. 33a, *gharbah*, see p. 33b, *kidmah*, see p. 549a, *jayb*, the opening, or opening of a garment above the chest which is used as a receptacle for small things including foodstuffs.

Verse 12

The *dallāl* or commission agent of course goes round the market to get business—it would seem that butchers once did the same. *Khānāt* means columns of figures. *Sā'*, like.

Verse 13

Jarmah, fleece-lined coat. *Khuṣm-ah*—one says, *khuṣmī minna-h*, I don't like him at all. '*Ammālāt* = *khabbāzāt*'.

Verse 14

In Ḥaḍramawt and Iraq I have found that there was a view popularly held that if women learned to read and write they would only use this to write to lovers—something of this notion was current in Ṣan'ā' also. Women of the ulema classes however did learn to read the Qur'ān, be they of the Hāshimī or Qāḍī classes. By the end of Imām Yaḥyā's reign at least some girls were going to schools.

Verse 15

Maklūdah = *maghbūnah*, *ghayr murbiḥah*, *ḥanqānah*, *mā bish laḥā rāḥah*. *Kaldah* means 'adam al-ribḥ', and there are verbs *lakada* and *iltakada*. '*Uṣbah* see p. 536, *mablūdah* = *balid*'.

Verse 16

Maḥjūrah, in purdah, secluded, '*awrah*, would be something that brings 'ār, shame etc., something to be kept covered. The *nashshādah*, Aḥmad al-Shāmī informs me, *tinshid bi-'l-āyāt wa-'l-ash'ār al-Yamaniyyah min dūn ālāt al-ṭarab wa-'l-adhkār ḥawāl al-mayyit*, chants (Qur'ānic) verses, Yemeni poetry without a musical instrument, and collects (*dhikr*) around a dead person. Men *nashshādīn* do the same. The women perform at a wedding ('*urs*), death (*mawt*), circumcisions (*ḡuhūr*). The sort of Yemeni poetry that might be sung would be that of al-Bur'ī, whose *ḍirwān* is printed. The *nashshādah* is not a wailing woman, she is not drawn from any particular class. They are considered *fāḍilāt sayyidāt*, ladies, but do not of course belong to the Prophet's house. Often they are employed in teaching girls who call them respectfully, *Saydat-nā*. Al-Dhahbānī in a note to his poem calls them women who wash the dead, but al-Shāmī says this is another matter. He remembered Banāt Lawzah were women who wash the dead. These women are respected and given an honourable place in a room.

Verse 17

Tinsil = *tukharrij min al-qīṭ'at al-qumāsh al-fitlah*, she unravels the woof (breadth-wise thread) from a piece of cloth. Basically *naslah* is the warp (length-wise thread), but *ghazlah* is the woof. *Nassal* = *fattal* to turn into *fitlah*, and the worker is *fattāl* (this last word in Aden is a term of abuse, meaning 'pimp'). *Haddab*, to make fringes, or to re-do thread, strengthening it by twisting new thread into it.

Bit'aṣṣab, to make twists of millet (sorghum) and lucerne for foddering sheep-and-goats or cattle ('*aṣīb*, pl. *al-'aṣā'ib li-'l-ghanam aw ḥaqq al-baqar*). This would be done in the entrance-hall (*dhilz*, see p. 441a) of the large Ṣan'ānī house.

Shariḥāt, merry, they like gay occasions (*yihibbayn al-zīnah*), they like the cup and the drum (*yihibbayn al-kās wa-'l-ṭās*), i.e., *al-ghunā*, singing. 'The cup' is not to be taken literally!

Verse 23

Bawtah = 'amal al-bayt, *sabrah* = ṭahy, *maḥfūsh* = munazzam, *naẓif*. The *mafrāj* with its flowered cushions on three sides is not inaptly compared with a flower. *Khawrah* = al-umniyyah; your desire of desires would be realised. *Khawrah* is also used of the cravings of pregnancy.

Verse 24

Tabta = jihat, towards, *ghayl*, see p. 19 seq., *daymah*, kitchen. The last line is typical of the humorous anti-climax characteristic of al-Dhahbānī's verse.

Verse 25

Tinaqqī al-ḥabb, see p. 546b, *tinza'*, *naza'*, draw water, 'uqiyy = māliḥ, luṣwah, see p. 33, *kibā*, see p. 395a, n. 29, *ladināt* = fi-hā ruṭūbah.

The *mukabbī/muṭayyib* was the name applied to the Jewish collector of dung or excrement. *Muṭayyib* in this sense is ancient as in A'shā Maymūn, *Dīwān*, ed. Geyer, GMS, London, 1928, 184.

Verse 26

Tafriḥah, women's afternoon gatherings, see p. 33a, n. 11, verb *tafarraṭ(at)*.

Verse 27

In connection with this verse may be quoted the women's song, *Ḥalaft lak yā Muḥammad, Mā zidit raja't lak bayt, Illā bi-maḡramah wa-sirwāl Ḥarāzī*, I swear to you Muḥammad I shall not come back to your house again, except for a headcloth and Ḥarāz trousers. These last usually called *libās* are expensively embroidered.

Verse 31

Shū'ah = bashi', but *shū'ah* is also said to mean *rimmah*, an evil smell, *shamāt*, explained as *rakik*, weak, *ghayr murattab*, disorganised. *Al-Mām* = al-Imām. *Kawdayn* = kāda. This attack on Imām Yaḥyā is of course completely unjustified. By 'four revolts' al-Dhahbānī must mean the Āl Wazīr revolution of 1948 and the lesser disturbance up to the *coup d'état* of 1962. Yaḥyā lived to a great age.

Verse 32

Yahtarimū = takhāṣamū (al-khiṣām wa-'l-tanāfus), *ḍaribāt* = al-bard, cold spells.

Verse 33

Şarfah = maṣrūf = ma'ishah, *shiyāṭah*, see p. 164b seq., *ghaffal*, made stupid, ignorant.

The allusion is to Imām Yaḥyā's promotion of religion and care for mosques. The verse has a Marxist colour.

Verse 34

Yihmil = yiharwil, trot, *qism*, lit., share, *min mayd* = min/li-ajl.

Verse 35

Dajjal, cf. Dajjāl, anti-Christ, = ḍallāl. For 'ushmān, read *ghishmān*, plur. of *ghashim*, ignorant, 'adhabah, hanging tail of a turban adopted by certain classes of notable, *ḥabbab*, to kiss, *naṣab(ah)* is a plur. of *nāṣibī*, opponent of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib.

Verse 36

Biylawmas = yitṣarṣar, to jingle. The *jallāyah* is the heavily embroidered robe worn by the Imām, a picture of which can be seen in *Arabian Studies*, III, 128, as worn by Imām Aḥmad. A *jallāyah* of his is in the Şan'ā' Museum. *Maḥliyy*, ornamented with silver, applied also to a rifle so decorated. Fine silk *maṣānif* used to be made in Şan'ā'. *Ḥalālāt* was explained as Qur'ānic quotations.

The 'arabiyyah, the Imām's coach, is kept outside the Şan'ā' Museum.

Verse 37

Zahrah is a silver rosette on a dagger-belt, or elsewhere. *Lāz*, silver described as resembling Mandaean work.

Verse 38

Biṣarṣar, see above, *junjulah/jinjilah*, pl., *janājil* = jawzah min al-fidḍah *mujaḥwafah*, hollow nut-shaped silver ornament, *duqqah*, sing. *duqqah*, hollow silver ball-bead, see p. 184a, n. 65 passim. *Mashāqir* are sprigs of sweet basil (*rayḥān*). One puts this on the horse's head to avert the evil eye—*yishaqqir al-khayl*, *rās al-ḥuṣān*—*yisrif al-'ayn*. *Waṣlah*, pl., *waṣalāt*, piece, bit.

Verse 39

The *qub'*, indigo-dyed turban of the *qabīlī*. The *qamīṣ*, the long gown of tribesfolk belted at the waist, is also dyed indigo. The silk *ṣāyāt* (see p. 425a) were only worn by the ulema.

Verse 40

The Ahl al-Khaṭwah are the same as the Ahl al-Daḥqah of the Shāfi'ī Sūfis of the south, lit., the People of the Step who, through supernatural means, can be, for instance, in Mecca one moment and back with you the next.

Verse 41

Mi'lāmah, a Qur'ān-school, *mizḥāmah* = zaḥmah, crowd. *Makrūb*, microbe, simply means *awsākh*, dirt, probably he is referring to the school latrines. It is doubtful if a man like al-Dhahbānī would fully understand what microbes are. *Sirāt*, sing., *sirah/sirih*, a well-rope.

Verse 42

Lawḥ, the wooden board used in elementary schools, corresponding to the slate used (formerly ?) in Britain, for copying and learning the Qur‘ān. *Jaḥr*, the earth etc. in the well-water that sinks to the bottom of the jar (*dawḥ*).

Verse 43

Bism al-Bāsimī is the name of a sort of recitation, used only in the Yemen, which children at the elementary stage learn in order to get to know the letters of the alphabet and the vowels. The title is derived from *bismillāh*. It has such definitions as ‘*al-bā’ nuḡṭah min asfal, wa-’l-tā’*. . . the b has a dot below and the t . . .’. The verse’s ‘*Alif* has nothing’ means that it has no dots.

The village *faqīh* used to teach (and doubtless still does) in the elementary school (*yudarris fi ’l-mi’lāmah*). He was also mostly the *sinaydār* of the mosque. He acted as a sort of local adviser (*mustashār*). For the local villagers or tribes he used to write their *makātīb*, e.g. *al-baṣā’ir* (house-deeds), ‘*uqūd al-dayn* (debt contracts), *al-’uhūd* (pacts), *al-zawāj wa-’l-ṭalāq* (marriage and

divorce). In the proverbial literature he is often satirised or a figure of fun.

The bastinado, *falakah* (Dozy, *Supplément*, *falaqah*, fully described there) is said to be a sort of pole with two holes at the ends, a rope being attached from one hole to the other. When a child has to be punished his legs are inserted between the rope and the pole and the apparatus wound tight—the soles of his feet are then held up to be beaten. In the villages where children mostly go bare-foot this punishment on their horny soles is probably not so severe as it sounds.

Verse 44

Qū‘ah, see p. 516a. It seems that this bath was commonly known as Ḥammām Qū‘ah, but, the title being distasteful, it was called Ḥammām Saba’. Its ugly title was not given it by Imām Yaḥyā of course. *Makhmū‘ah* = *maḡhūrah*, put to shame, mortified, snubbed.

The hero of Ghaymān is probably Sayf b. Dhī Yazan, still a popular hero of the remote past to Şan‘ānīs.

Ṣan'ā' today. A map of Ṣan'ā' (courtesy the General Organization of Antiquities and Libraries) of the old city and modern adjacent areas. An indication of the present-day growth of the city is gained from von Wissmann's map (p. 118) and also from the aerial photograph on p. 21.

